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ABSTRACT

In a study examining the effectiveness of story-impressions (a previewing strategy) on story comprehension, remedial eighth grade students were asked to write predictions or "story-guesses" based on a series of one-word clues (story-impressions) that had been extracted from the material to be read. Having written a logical "hypothesis story" of their own, students then read the assigned material and confirmed, modified, or disconfirmed their predictions. Results indicated that story impressions had a significantly facilitative effect on story comprehension. Story-impressions may be introduced as a whole class activity in which the teacher writes an "hypothesis story" generated by the class on the blackboard. After reading the story, the class discusses the predictions as a group. The teacher should stress that it is important to make only logical and creative guesses, not to match the author. A number of steps can guide teachers when developing a set of story-impressions, including using words directly from the story and arranging the impressions vertically, indicating their chronological order. Story-impressions may also be used as a retrieval device when giving an oral report, as a writing activity, as a notetaking technique, as guides for students writing summaries of stories, and as aids for students developing sequencing skills. (Examples of story-impressions and hypothesis-stories are included.) (LLZ)

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# Story-Impressions: A Prereading Writing-Activity

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Story-Impressions: A Prereading Writing-Activity

Story-impressions are a prereading writing-activity for improving readers comprehension of narrative passages. Story-impressions are different from other kinds of previews (Graves and Cooke, 1980; Graves, Cooke and LaBerge, 1983) in that they provide a very minimal amount of specific background information about the story, attempting instead to engage students in the formulation of hypotheses about the story's content prior to reading. The technique is wholly consistent with and easily derivable from recent theoretical developments in the understanding of basic comprehension processes.

Current models of reading (Smith, 1978; Rumelhart, 1977, 1981; Rumelhart and Ortony, 1977) suggest that we understand what is new to us in terms of what we already know. To comprehend a story, the reader must activate appropriate prior knowledge structures usually called schemata and make "guesses" and "predictions". The reader then tests out his/her "guesses" by evaluating them for "goodness of fit" with the information (clues) supplied by the author (Rumelhart, 1984). As a previewing technique, story-impressions get readers to create their own "story-guess" as a prediction of what the upcomming story could be about. These predictions are then confirmed, modified or disconfirmed as the reader encounters the details of the actual story in a manner identical to that described by Rumelhart (1984) for the general process of understanding a story. In this way,

story-impressions induce the reader to engage in interactive reading, as well as, to formulate their own content preview.

Story-impressions, themselves, are a set of clues extracted directly from the story. The clues provide the reader with an impression of how characters and events interact within the story. Figure 1 presents a set of story-impressions for The Tell-Tale Heart by Edgar Allen Poe. After reading the set of clues, students are asked to render them comprehensible by attempting to fit them together within a story structure of their own. As a consequence, readers receive some relevant ideas about the story's content and structure without having large portions of the plot told to them. The object is not for the student to guess the exact relationship among events and characters but to simply compare their own hypothesis with the author's actual account.

In the case of "The Tell-Tale Heart," the clues suggest some sort of murder scheme that ultimately ends with a confession. As an illustration, Table 1 presents a story-guess written by an eighth-grade student using the story-impressions extracted from "The Tell-Tale Heart." Note that the central events of the hypothesized story depict a murder scene and confession complete with incidents similar to those of the original Poe tale.

Recently, McGinley and Denner (1985) conducted a study that compared the use of story impressions as a prereading activity with reading-only for remedial eighth-grade students. After reading the story-impressions students were instructed to write a

logical "hypothesis story" of their own based on the impressions. Figure 2 presents the story-impressions selected for the passage used in the investigation, titled "Never Trust A Lady" by J. Cooper (1977). The story describes a locksmith named Horace who has a mania for old, rare books. Once a year he steals jewels to pay for the books. This year, however, he is caught by a pretty young lady who tricks him into opening a safe. Horace is later arrested for the jewel robbery and ends up as the assistant prison librarian because no one believed his story about the young lady claiming to be the owner of the house. Table 2 presents a story-guess written by one of the students who participated in the study.

The results of the study indicated that the prereading activity of processing the clues into a logical story interpretation had a significant facilitative effect on subsequent story comprehension. Moreover, ability to approximate the author's story in the story-guess was not significantly related to subsequent comprehension of the actual story. The process of developing the hypothesis story itself, whether correct or incorrect, and then actively testing it out was apparently the major factor in facilitating comprehension. The outcome of the study suggests that the use of story-impressions assists below-average adolescent readers in activating relevant story schemes, and induces them to approach the reading task as interactive process involving hypothesis testing.

How to Introduce Story-Impressions

STEP 1: Start with a general introduction, such as; "Today we are going to read a really great story, but, before we start the story we are going to make up what we think this story could be about."

STEP 2: Introduce the story-impressions. "Here are some clues about the story we are going to read. We are going to use these clues to develop our own hypothesis (guess) about this story. After that, we will read the story together to see if the author had the same ideas we have or not."

STEP 3: Have everyone read all the clues through once first. Then, using the blackboard or transparency brainstorm ideas to connect the clues from the story in the order presented.

STEP 4: Using the ideas generated by the students develop a story together on the blackboard (or on a transparency) that logically connects all the clues. Read the class's story-guess with your students when finished. (If time runs out, reread the story-guess again at the beginning of the next class meeting before going on to step five).

STEP 5: Next read the actual story with your students silently or you read it orally, when finished discuss confirmations and disconfirmations of the students' hypotheses. Indicate that the closeness of match with the author is not important! Say to the students, "the only important thing is that we make logical guesses before reading and then change our minds

when we find out what the author really said. You don't have to match the author exactly, creative guesses are good guesses."

STEP 6: On subsequent occasions, have students write their own hypothesis story (story-guess) based on a set of clues from a different story. As an alternative, students can complete the activity in small groups.

How to Develop a Set of Story-Impressions

The following are a set of rules for developing story-impressions based on our experiences and feedback from teachers who have tried this activity with their classes: (1) Read the entire story through once first; (2) Reread the story and select words that designate characters, setting, and key elements of the plot; (3) Use a word directly from the story where possible; substitute a different word only when it makes it easier to capture an entire episode; (4) Use a maximum of 3 words per impression; (5) Limit the number of impressions to 10-15 for a short story (or chapter) and to 15-20 impressions for an entire young-adult novel; (6) Finally, arrange the clues vertically and use arrows to indicate clue order.

When developing story-impressions for a young-adult novel, a good source of clues can be the table-of-contents for the novel. This has been tried with students and it worked quite well. In addition to the use of the chapter titles as clues, this provides the students with a good lesson on the value of a table-of-contents. Of course, not all publishers supply such

tables and not all tables-of-contents provide effective clues. This is unfortunate because used as story-impressions they can provide adolescent readers with a means to do a meaningful preview.

Story Impressions as a Writing Activity

Story-impressions can also be used to help students improve their writing skills. Students like writing stories based on the impressions, and the experience of connecting the clues together in a logical fashion can help students begin to see writing as a problem-solving process. In addition, when students have difficulty getting started on an assignment, having them make up impressions could help overcome their "writer's block". Finally, students can be assigned to write a composition based on impressions extracted from a story and then asked compare what they have written to the writing style of the actual author.

Other Uses for Story-Impressions

*Story-impressions can be used as a notetaking technique for narrative texts or films.

*Story-impressions can guide students while writing summaries of stories.

*The clues can act is as an effective retrieval device. One teacher has tried having students use story impressions to give oral book reports with good results.

*Story impressions can also be used to help students develop sequencing skills (ie., Which set of clues is in the same order as

they occured in the story?)

In summary, teachers can use story-impressions as an exciting new way to get students involved in reading as an interactive process. They also can be used to integrate reading and writing lessons is numerous ways.

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Table 1

An eighth grade student's story-guess written from the story-impressions for "The Tell-Tale Heart".

There was a young man and his father, an old man. They lived in a house on a hill out in the bouniey's. The old man hated his son because he had an ugly eye.

The young man was asleep in his bedroom when he was awakend by screaming. He went to the bedroom and saw his father laying in the tub. There was blood everywhere and a knife through him.

The young man found a tape recording hidden behind the door on the floor. He turned it on there was screaming on the tape. The young man started to call the police, but then he stopped and remembered what his mother had told him. She had told him that he had a split personality. So he called the police and confessed to being crazy and killing his father. His heartbeat was heavy as he called.

Table 2

An eighth grade student's story-guess written from the story-impressions for "Never Trust A Lady".

Once there was this guy named Horace. People thinks he's not responsable and they think he is a locksmith. That was sent to prison for breaking into houses. There was a jewel theft. The guy took the expensive book to. Horace had a robbery planned out.

He got out of prison. He went over to the neighborhood. He was to go in to this kitchen door, and opening the safe, but all of o sudden he sneezed. He herd a voice from a young lady. He senced that there was going to be trouble. He hoped she wouldn't see him, but she did. Horace said to the lady that he would put the stuff back.

When he did this he said he will forget the combonation, but he still took the jewels. The cops came and arrested him, and the cops took his fingerprints. The grayed hair women took him to prison for the rest of his life. He was a prison-librarian for the rest of his life. He was mad.

## FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. Story-impressions for "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allen Poe.

Figure 2. Story-impressions for "Never Trust A Lady" by Victor Canning.

HOUSE
|
OLD MAN
|
YOUNG MAN
|
HATRED
|
UGLY EYE
|
DEATH
|
TUB, BLOOD, KNIFE
|
BURIED
|
FLOOR
|
POLICE
|
HEARTBEAT
|
GUILT
|
CRAZY
|
CONFESSION

HORACE
|
LOCKSMITH
|
PRISON
|
JEWEL THEFT
|
EXPENSIVE BOOKS
|
ROBBERY
|
KITCHEN DOOR
|
SAFE
|
SNEEZE
|
VOICE
|
LADY
|
AGREEMENT
|
COMBINATION
|
JEWELS
|
ARRESTED
|
FINGERPRINTS
|
GRAY HAIRED WOMAN
|
PRISON LIBRARIAN
|
MAD